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ABSTRACT

Communication, mathematics, science, and vocational skills are critical to an individual's career progression, but they do not guarantee job success. Many employers believe that employability skills are of primary importance. Because of the changing nature of today's employment picture, employers need creative, flexible workers who have a broad range of interpersonal and managerial skills. Categories of employability skills include individual competence, personal reliability skills, economic adaptability skills, and group and organizational effectiveness skills. Another grouping includes presenting a positive image, exhibiting positive work attitudes, practicing good work habits, practicing ethical behavior, communicating effectively, accepting responsibility, and cooperating with others. The best results in developing these skills seem to be achieved when employability skill training is integrated with academic and vocational skill training--forming a set of five basic skills. Strategies for incorporating employability skill development concepts in the classroom include demanding good deportment, expressing work values through classroom instruction, encouraging self-esteem, promoting and displaying a positive attitude, and using instructional materials that illustrate the importance of employability skill development. (10 references) (YLB)

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Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

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EMPLOYABILITY–THE FIFTH BASIC SKILL

Communication, mathematics, and science skills have been identified as the three basic academic skills required of high school graduates. Entry into the job market is contingent upon having a fourth set of skills as well. These are the job-specific or vocational skills required by the occupation. Although these four types of skills are critical to an individual's career progression, they do not guarantee job success. Many employers believe that employability skills--skills that enable an individual to acquire and keep a job--are of primary importance (Lankard 1987). This ERIC Digest discusses the relevance of employability as a fifth basic skill, describes employability components, and discusses strategies for incorporating employability skills into the instructional process.

Why Are Employability Skills Basic to Job Success?

The changing nature of today's employment picture is creating new challenges for employers and employees alike. Employers, faced with a shrinking labor pool, are encountering many applicants who have minimum job competencies. From these applicants, they must select for hire those who have the greatest potential for meeting job demands. Conversely, the jobs for which employers are hiring today require workers to have a broader range of competencies than ever before--competencies that are job specific but also include the kinds of management and organizational skills previously required only of supervisors.

The demand for this new kind of worker has been triggered by a number of factors, one of which is the multicultural nature of the work force. The U.S. Department of Labor projects that, by 2000, 75 percent of all people entering the work force will be women and minorities, many of whom are immigrants. To facilitate the job success of these individuals, employers and co-workers alike must be supportive and attempt to understand the unique attitudes, behaviors, and habits common to people of various cultures. Good interpersonal skills are crucial to such efforts at "valuing differences."

Increased automation has reduced the need for supervision of entry-level workers. These workers are now expected to operate independently in roles that require problem-solving and decision-making skills. Increased competition from national and international markets is also influencing changes in the workplace. Competition is a major factor driving business to be more efficient and to employ strategies that will improve production, service, and product quality. Because such strategies typically involve improving worker collaboration and teamwork, employers need creative, flexible workers who have a broad range of interpersonal and managerial skills.

What Skills Are Termed "Employability Skills"?

There are numerous listings of the subject area of employability skills. Most of the lists focus on the topics of personal image, attitudes, habits, and behaviors; techniques of communication, problem solving, and decision making; and management and organizational processes. A grouping of such skills was summarized by Gainer (1988) as follows:

- Individual Competence: communication skills, comprehension, computation, and culture
- Personal Reliability Skills: personal management, ethics, and vocational maturity
- Economic Adaptability Skills: problem solving, learning, employability, and career development
- Group and Organizational Effectiveness Skills: interpersonal skills, organizational skills, and skills in negotiation, creativity, and leadership.

The *Connections: School and Work Transitions* curriculum called "Work Maturity Skills" (Lankard 1987) identifies seven categories of employability skills and offers competency-based training modules for each. These categories and related modules are as follows:

1. **Present a Positive Image**: follow good grooming practices, practice good health habits, dress appropriately for the job, exhibit self-confidence
2. **Exhibit Positive Work Attitudes**: use basic social skills, be creative and willing to learn, take pride in your work
3. **Practice Good Work Habits**: maintain regular attendance, be thorough and diligent, follow safety practices
4. **Practice Ethical Behavior**: exercise integrity and good judgment, respect property, follow company rules
5. **Communicate Effectively**: demonstrate speech, writing, and nonverbal communication skills; demonstrate good listening habits
6. **Accept Responsibility**: use initiative, use problem-solving techniques, manage personal responsibilities
7. **Cooperate with Others**: work as a member of a team, work under supervision

Of the range of desired employability skills, some are evident to employers as early as the job interview. The effect of positive and negative behaviors, for example, was documented in a study of employer hiring decisions (Hollenbeck 1984). In this study, employers who watched a series of videotaped interviews rated applicants on job readiness. Applicants who demonstrated negative behaviors--language, appearance, mannerisms, and especially attitude--received lower assessments than those without negative behaviors. Negative behaviors also lowered employer assessments of other factors such as education and training, even though these factors remained constant in all interviews. Bad attitude had the greatest negative effect on employers' decisions to hire. Of the machine trade, clerical, and retail employers who assessed the applicants, none of the clerical or retail employers and only 11.1 percent of the machine trade employers would hire an applicant with a bad attitude, irrespective of the applicant's education and training record.

The Research and Policy Committee of the Committee on Economic Development summarized their 1984 survey of employer concerns in three points (Buck and Barrick 1987):

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- For entry-level positions, employers are looking for young people who demonstrate a sense of responsibility, self-discipline, pride, teamwork, and enthusiasm.
- Employers strongly value employees' ability to learn and to solve problems.
- Employers think that schools are doing a poor job of developing these much-needed attitudes, abilities, and skills.

A survey sponsored by the National Association of Manufacturers (Barton and Kirsch 1990) found that employers want schools to take more responsibility for students' employability skill development. Employers said that they want schools to teach both general and specific employability skills, including attendance, punctuality, and good work attitudes. The consensus of employers in these and other similar studies remains consistent--employability skills are important on the job and must be taught in the schools.

Developing Employability Skills

The best results seem to be achieved when employability skill training is integrated with academic and vocational skill training--forming a set of five basic skills. In this way, the relevance of the five types of skills are interrelated and taught as basic to job market success--something in which the learner has a level of interest.

The following strategies are suggested for incorporating employability skill development concepts in the classroom (Bishop and Lankard 1987):

- **Demand Good Deportment in the Classroom.** Initiate strict guidelines for tardiness, class cutting, and discipline.
- **Express Work Values through Classroom Instruction.** Promote and require timeliness, effort, responsibility, and other values. Over 65 percent of studied employers were negatively affected by workers who did not try.
- **Encourage Self-Esteem in Students.** Expect the best from students. Attitudes about self were reflected in applicants' nonverbal behaviors--a factor influencing employer assessments.
- **Promote and Display a Positive Attitude in the Classroom.** Attitude is an important part of a person's employability rating and can be improved with practice and effort.
- **Use Instructional Materials that Illustrate the Importance of Employability Skill Development.** Izzo and Lankard (1987) provide examples of how having (or lacking) employability skills affects a person's ability to find, get, and keep a job.

Additional strategies teachers can use to monitor students' employability skill development were identified by Buck and Barrick (1987) as follows:

- Identify the problem so that the person can recognize habits that are annoying
- Define the terms that describe various habits
- Devise a way to measure traits, attitudes, or habits
- Give frequent feedback
- Concentrate on improving a limited number of habits at a time
- Employ a meaningful reward system
- Tell employers about improvements in work habits and attitudes
- Provide the student with a method of monitoring on-the-job behavior
- Make other class members a part of the monitoring, evaluation, and reward system

By addressing employability skill development as a fifth basic skill and teaching it concurrently with communication, mathematics, science, and vocational courses, the content can be analyzed and practiced daily so that students automatically follow practices and demonstrate behaviors that will enhance their job performance and retention.

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